

**Guest columnists**

## **Transportation: a reformist agenda**

**By Sue Donaldson and Deb Eddy**

*Special to The Times*

TWO things strike the average person about transportation — roads, rail, buses, sidewalks, bikeways — in the Puget Sound region.

First, it's not clear who's in charge. The list of transportation agencies is a veritable alphabet soup, and many agencies seem to be governed by boards of officials who were originally elected to do other things.

Second, there's an enormous amount of money involved and it is not always clear where it comes from or exactly how it gets spent. Thus, the average person is a little wary of new funding proposals and exactly how they would deliver the goods.

Existing agencies and what we affectionately call the "transportation junkies" have been working for years on how to expand funding and improve popular support for funding transportation. We're convinced that a connection needs to be made between reform of transportation governance structures and successful funding of transportation.

We've concluded that an aggressive overhaul of governance structures would go far to assist in winning public support for new funding. From boardrooms to legislative chambers, many agree that greater clarity of responsibility and political accountability for transportation planning and financing is required to improve public trust.

Many smart and well-meaning people are talking about this topic and issuing recommendations, but it will amount to little unless we have regional leaders who are ready to step up and embrace significant change that goes beyond tweaking the existing system.

Everyone agrees that most of the existing agencies are doing a good job but that under the current structure, we lack a way to articulate a common vision across all modes of travel. This leaves the public with fragmented proposals and multiple funding requests.

Last year, the Cascadia Center at the Discovery Institute convened the Transportation Working Group (TWG), chaired by former Boeing executive and chairman of Gov. Gary Locke's Blue Ribbon Commission on Transportation, Doug Beighle.

This group of 39 citizens from business, labor, environment and civic groups met over several months to study and formulate shared recommendations. It strongly recommended a consolidated regional governance structure and linked that recommendation to the need for some way to raise money regionally that would be available for all modes of travel, and not just limited to one or another use.

Last month, a consortium of organizations hosted a civic meeting on transportation governance at the Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington, moderated by Dick Ford, a member of the Washington State Transportation Commission, and Cindy Zehnder, president of TVW. At that meeting, there appeared to be a consensus that governance reform is a subject that has "found its time," in the words of Bob Drewel, Puget Sound Regional Council executive director.

The challenge posed by these efforts and others will be developing effective next steps. And that is the purview of the currently seated Legislature. Rep. Ed Murray, D-Seattle, has recently proposed legislation that would, we understand, do two things:

- It would restructure the existing Regional Transportation Investment District to become the Regional Transportation Improvement Authority (RTIA), replacing the current board of county council members with a board made up of county council members, city officials and county executives. RTIA boundaries could be multicounty or a single county.

By allowing counties to "go it alone" rather than creating a regional structure, this proposal doesn't strike us as being very reformist, and may indeed be rather regressive. Additionally, the proposal perpetuates the problem of a lack of political accountability by relying on boards that are not directly elected to the task at hand. Direct elections are probably necessary to create the accountability to ensure public trust and support.

- Murray proposes a new commission, with a chair chosen by the governor, to tackle the issue of how to restructure transportation governance in the Puget Sound area to "better integrate transportation activities, including planning, financing and programming functions in the region." This group is to be comprised of citizens with specific expertise in municipal law, transportation planning and project development, organizational management and administration. The county executives in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties will appoint the members.

While this is a good beginning and to be applauded, we think it falls short of what's needed. We fear that the nominal identification of "experts" for inclusion in this commission may result in a "least-disruptive-to-the-status-quo" design that doesn't serve the region well.

Some will call for an extensive public-involvement process to cure this limitation and that might help. But the design of the commission itself will indicate just how seriously progressive redesign will be addressed.

We'd propose that the makeup of the commission be heavily weighted with innovators and structural designers from other arenas, whether or not they are well-versed in existing transportation structures. Good staffing can bring everyone up to speed on transportation minutiae in short order, as the Cascadia Center TWG effort demonstrated.

This region doesn't lack for private and nonprofit-sector innovators. Let's see what high-energy and creative thinkers such as Dr. Lee Hartwell, Sally Jewell, Jeff Bezos and Dr. Helene Gayle, to name a few, can bring to the transportation-service arena. We will all be living with the results ... or lack thereof ... for a very long time.

*Sue Donaldson, left, is a former Seattle City Council member; Deb Eddy, right, is a former mayor of Kirkland. They are working with the Appleseed Foundation to establish the Washington Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest.*